

Judge not. Don't cast pearls before swine. Ask; seek; Knock. Do unto others. Beware the wolf in sheep's clothing. Bear good fruit. This morning's gospel rolls out some of Jesus' greatest hits in a continuous, and occasionally confusing address. Matthew's gospel gives us these gems as the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount – which was already full of quotable wisdom. But the sense of this big finish is one of Jesus outlining some of the important choices we face, not just as people of faith, but as humans in the world. And 'judgement' is the first of those choices Jesus questions.

We are far more likely to offer advice that comes with an entirely different focus: 'Don't dish it out if you can't take it.' We anticipate criticism as a necessary part of life, and say things like this to suggest that you need to go through life with a thick skin and a sharp tongue. Our version imagines the worst of one another. Jesus would invite us to do better.

Don't judge one another, for you will be measured by the same standard you apply to others – your criticism WILL come back to bite you – so don't do it. Jesus proposes a world without the continual jabbing and snapping that has become an accepted part of so much of our public conversation.

There is judgement in every public protest – in every letter to the editor – in the barely concealed rage against 'the system' or 'the government' or 'the stranger/the other/the problem person.' And how do such deep divisions develop? With a thousand little decisions – the choices we make about motives or agendas – the conclusions we reach because of our obstinate certainty that there is only one right answer, and we have it. Judgements based on prejudice, on ignorance, or even judgement based on 'what I know to be true' are dangerous weapons.

Jesus asks us to lay those weapons down.

In our rush to be right, we neglect our own faults – the smudge on someone else's character is easier to see than the stain on our own. We say that no one is perfect – which usually means we want our flaws to be overlooked - but we are not willing to let others live in and work through their flaws. Jesus draws yet another choice to our attention.

Can you let it go? Can you live in an imperfect world, among imperfect people?

There's a way to make that more manageable, according to Jesus. Treat one another as you would like to be treated. Love your neighbour (and everyone else) as you love yourself. This is the God-honouring thing to do; the Jesus' following way to live. It is the most important choice on offer; something that embodies the impulse of the whole of the scriptural tradition. Just do it, Jesus is saying; stop comparing and start making compassionate, empathetic, gracious choices. The result will surprise you. The result will change the world.

I suggested earlier that this sermon on the mount 'wrap-up' could be slightly confusing...The confusion comes at the end of this carefully arranged bit of advice. 'Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.'

Are we now asked to 'judge' those who (claim to) speak God's wisdom into the world? Are those perhaps above (or below) our compassion and grace?

Not at all – we are instead reminded to be perceptive. 'You will know by their fruits,' says Jesus – a warning that we would do well to heed.

It's not too late, either – though the fruits of two thousand years of mis-representations of faithfulness are a strange and not always appetizing buffet. For once we decide not to judge – once we make our best effort to treat one another as we would like to be treated – once we get honest with ourselves about the limits of human perfection and the broad generosity of God's love – then we are in a position to know when we are being manipulated.

(Eugene Peterson's paraphrase works well here – a specific indictment of 'smiling preachers' who seek to influence us for their own purposes...)

¹³⁻¹⁴ “Don't look for shortcuts to God. The market is flooded with surefire, easygoing formulas for a successful life that can be practiced in your spare time. Don't fall for that stuff, even though crowds of people do. The way to life—to God!—is vigorous and requires total attention.

¹⁵⁻²⁰ “Be wary of false preachers who smile a lot, dripping with practiced sincerity. Chances are they are out to rip you off some way or other. Don't be impressed with charisma; look for character. Who preachers *are* is the main thing, not what they say. A genuine leader will never exploit your emotions or your pocketbook. These diseased trees with their bad apples are going to be chopped down and burned.

The unfortunate thing about these last remarks is that we tend to focus on the destructive imagery. Our fear of retribution (or our desire for vengeance) means that we hear Jesus' advice with only self-preservation (or the satisfaction of being right) as the takeaway. Forget about the consuming fire – that's what happens to dead wood or unproductive trees. It's an effective metaphor that grabs our attention, but the most important thing that Jesus offers is not condemnation; it is hope. Jesus calls us to be companions on the road rather than competitors; to be confident of God's goodness and grace. Urged to be compassionate towards one another – empathetic and encouraging. Called to be aware of the pitfalls of ambition and the ease with which good intentions can be turned to selfish ambition.

Such are the choices Jesus puts before us. The way we act toward one another can transform the world, for better or worse. Jesus guides us toward a world marked by compassion and grace – something he describes as the kingdom of God. This is our goal. This is the hope offered by the gospel.